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Exploring psychological wellbeing in only children.

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ABSTRACT

This study qualitatively explored the experiences of only children and their psychological wellbeing, with particular focus on sociability, relationships and achievement. Six participants were recruited using purposive sampling from either Manchester Metropolitan University's Psychology Research Participation Pool or the researcher's pre-existing contacts. Each participant was interviewed using semi-structured interviews to gather data surrounding their unique experiences as an only child in relation to their psychological wellbeing. The data was analysed using thematic analysis and four over-arching themes emerged: no sibling closeness, positive parent-child relationship, high parental expectations and preference for small groups of people. All four themes provided an insight into how psychological wellbeing is affected by being an only child. The most prominent finding was that the parent-child relationship seems to be of most significance to an only child's psychological wellbeing

KEY WORDS:	**ONLY CHILDREN**	**WELLBEING**	**SOCIABILITY**	**RELATIONSHIPS**	**ACHIEVEMENT**

Introduction

One of the first researchers to emphasise the effect of birth order was Adler in 1927. He claimed that birth order contributed significantly to the development of an individual's style of life. "Each child is treated uniquely within the family depending on their order of birth" (Maltby, Day and Macaskill, 2013). Adler was the first theorist to suggest that the family is not experienced in the same way by every member within it. Adler conceptualised the effects of birth order with descriptions of personality characteristics of eldest children, second children, youngest children and only children. In particular, Adler described only children as likely to be pampered, especially by the mother, due to the fact that they have no sibling rivals and no sibling models. He went on to describe adult characteristics of only children which include a high need for approval, great difficulty in handling criticism and dislike, and intellectually able and high achievers.

Only children

Only children are often subject to negative stereotyping. These negative stereotypes are pervasive, despite the growing trend towards one-child families and evidence of the strengths of an only child. People maintain definite beliefs about the characteristics of each ordinal position in the family, and typically view only children as lonely, spoiled and maladjusted (Mancillas, 2006). Adler's research may have contributed to the way in which people conceptualise and stereotype only children. However, more positively and more recently, a study that emphasised the only child's strengths was Falbo and Polit's (1986) meta-analyses of the only child literature. They found that only children were by no means disadvantaged when compared to children with siblings in terms of achievement, adjustment, character, intelligence and sociability. In fact, only children surpassed children with siblings in terms of intelligence and achievement, and tended to have more positive relations with their parents (Smith, Cowie and Blades, 2011). Although the majority of research has presented only children in a more positive light, what about their psychological wellbeing as an only child?

As mentioned previously, there is a growing trend towards one-child families. In 2003, 42% of all UK families were one-child families. This figure rose to 47% in 2013, and it is thought that by 2022 more than half of all UK families will be one-child families (Spencer, 2015). One reason for this growing trend is that many women are delaying parenthood in favour of pursuing a career, resulting in women having children later on in life which may only leave time to have one child, possibly due to fertility reasons. Approximately 1 in 7 couples will have difficulty conceiving which often leads to the decision to have assisted conception, such as intrauterine insemination (IUI) or in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) (NHS Choices, 2017). However, such processes are expensive and their success rates are very low. Couples may only be able to afford one treatment of IUI or IVF which unfortunately may not be successful or they may be lucky enough to have one child.

Wellbeing

Similarly, there is an increasing awareness surrounding psychological wellbeing. Wellbeing is a topic within positive psychology, a different approach to psychology

first introduced by Seligman in 1998. Seligman's movement towards positive psychology emphasised that psychology is not just the study of weakness, disease and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue, and treatment is not just fixing what is wrong; it is also building what is right (Seligman, 2002). There is no single definition of wellbeing, however it is agreed that wellbeing includes the presence of positive emotions, such as contentment and happiness, and the absence of negative emotions, such as depression and anxiety (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016).

Seligman (2012) constructed a Wellbeing Theory. According to his theory, psychological wellbeing has five core elements and these elements can help individuals to reach a life of fulfilment, happiness and meaning. The theory is also known as the PERMA model and its five elements are positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment. In order to experience psychological wellbeing, we need positive emotion in our lives, such as being able to be optimistic and view the past, present and future in a positive way. In our lives it is important to fully engage in activities. Full engagement in activities creates a state of 'flow' which allows us to be entirely absorbed in the present, which is crucial in stretching our intelligence, skills and emotional capabilities. Relationships and social connections are integral to our psychological wellbeing. "Humans are social animals that thrive for connection, love, intimacy, and a strong emotional and physical interaction with other humans" (Pascha, 2017). A sense of meaning in our lives stems from serving a cause bigger than ourselves. Meaning gives people reason and a greater purpose in life. Creating goals and ambitions gives us a sense of accomplishment which is important to thrive and flourish. This in turn, brings about a greater sense of psychological wellbeing (Pascha, 2017).

Sociability

One element of Seligman's Wellbeing Theory that can be directly related to only children is sociability. Kitzmann, Cohen and Lockwood (2002) examined the social competence of only children. They found no significant differences in self-concept, loneliness, and number and quality of friendships compared to children from two-child families. However, in terms of social preference, only children were nominated by their peers as 'least liked' and most often aggressive, victimised and withdrawn (Maltby, Day and Macaskill, 2013). In their quantitative review of the only child literature, Falbo and Polit (1986) found that only children tended to score lower on sociability than non-only children when self-report measures were implemented. Adjacent to this, only children scored just as high as non-only children on sociability when peer ratings were used. This discrepancy could be explained by the greater amount of time only children spend alone or in the presence of adults compared to non-only children, so they may acquire a preference for more mature activities. An example to support this interpretation comes from a survey conducted in 1960. Claudy (1984) reported that only children spent more time in solitary, intellectual and artistic activities and less time in group-orientated and practical activities than their non-only children peers. Another way to explain this discrepancy could be due to the lower need for affiliation in only children as a result of the large amount of affection they receive from their parents. Connors (1963) suggested that because of the large amounts of affection only children receive from their parents, the less they are motivated to affiliate with others. Consequently, the sociability scores of only children

may actually reflect their preference in activities and/or their close ties to their parents.

Relationships

Another element of Seligman's Wellbeing Theory that can be directly related to only children is relationships. Falbo (1984) proposed that only children are more likely to develop an internal locus of control due to a highly reactive approach to bringing up a child that many first-time parents take. "Those with an internal locus of control tend to have a strong sense of self and a high capacity for leadership" (Johnson, 2014), and also have a propensity to responsibly and proactively engage with their surroundings and other people. Falbo's justification for this development of an internal locus of control was because these parents tend to react more promptly and more frequently to their child's behaviour in terms of praise and punishment, meaning that their child is more likely to develop the belief that their behaviour causes their parents' reaction. Because there are no other children in the house, only children receive their parents' undivided attention, and develop a strong conception of the relationship between their behaviour and the reactions of their parents. Therefore only children quickly internalise the meaning and weight of their actions from a young age (Johnson, 2014). In another study by Falbo and Polit (1986), they argue that only children share a specific type of relationship with their parents, one that is characterised by heightened anxiety and attention. Parents with one child are initially more anxious than parents with more than one child due to lack of experience. It is thought that this heightened anxiety affects the way in which the parents bring up the child. Schachter (1959) suggested that the anxiety the parents felt motivated them to react promptly to their child's behaviour which is thought to establish a closer connection between the parent and child in times of stress.

Achievement

The final element of Seligman's Wellbeing theory that can be directly related to only children is achievement. Only children are often subconsciously put under immense pressure by their parents, understandably as it is their only chance to raise a child and they do not want to make mistakes at the expense of the child. This kind of pressure may lead to the child feeling obligated to 'do right' by their parents (Pickhardt, 2009). This 'need to please' their parents may sometimes intensify to perfectionism. Perfectionists are more focused on avoiding failure, rather than focusing on success which only children may sometimes feel the need to do to avoid disappointing their parents. Ashby, LoCicero and Kenny (2003) examined the relationship between birth order and perfectionism and found that only children felt more anxiety about pressure to achieve than non-only children. Often inexperience in bringing up a child leads to parents having unrealistic expectations of their child. Waddell and Ball (1980) found that first-time parents tend to underestimate the time it takes to be toilet-trained, speak a complete sentence and sleep continuously through the night. There is also evidence to suggest that parents maintain these heightened expectations beyond this early period (Clausen, 1996; Kammeyer, 1967). These heightened parental expectations may contribute towards the development of achievement motivation, defined as "a social form of motivation involving a competitive drive to meet standards of excellence" (Colman, 2008). This is thought to emerge from parents placing high standards on their children at a young age

(Winterbottom, 1958) and may account for greater achievement in only children compared to non-only children.

Justification for this study

The majority of research emphasises the ways in which only children do not differ significantly to non-only children, unlike earlier research. Within psychology, we are now aware that only children can be just as social, have just as good relationships and achieve just as well, if not better, than children with siblings. However, what research into this area fails to consider is how an only child's psychological wellbeing can be affected. Since there is an increasing awareness of psychological wellbeing and a growing trend towards one-child families, perhaps the psychological wellbeing of only children should start to be taken into consideration. The aim of this research is to build upon existing literature by exploring psychological wellbeing in only children, with particular focus on three key elements which are thought to be integral to psychological wellbeing: sociability, relationships and achievement.

Research questions

The central research question for this study is to explore the unique experiences of only children and whether being an only child has impacted their psychological wellbeing throughout their life. The more specific research questions to explore the central research question are:

1)   Is sociability affected by being an only child? If so, what impact does this have on psychological wellbeing?
2)   Do the relationships in an only child's life affect psychological wellbeing?
3)   Does an only child's psychological wellbeing suffer as a result of pressure to achieve?

Methodology

Design

The design of this study was qualitative in nature. "Qualitative research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the world as seen through the eyes of the people being studied" (Wilmot, 2005). Qualitative interviews allow for rich, detailed, in-depth data to be collected encompassing a person's thoughts, feelings, beliefs and experiences surrounding a particular topic. According to McQuerrey (no date), qualitative interviewing not only allows the interviewer to gather hard, factual data but to also collect emotional data, necessary for this research as the whole study was based around psychological wellbeing. For example, one of the questions from the interview schedule asked the participant whether they ever felt pressure from their parents to achieve something and how this made them feel. Asking the participant to describe a particular situation where this might have happened from start to finish, should unveil much greater detail about the emotions, the setting and the scene (McQuerrey, no date), therefore giving the researcher a greater insight of the participants' thoughts, feelings and experiences. The epistemological position of this study was interpretivist. Epistemology is the theory of knowledge and knowledge acquired in the discipline of interpretivism is socially constructed rather than

objectively determined (Carson et al., 2001). The goal of interpretivist research is to understand and interpret meanings in human behaviour rather than to generalise and predict causes and effects (Neuman, 2000; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988).Therefore, by using qualitative methods and taking on an interpretivist approach, more meaningful findings were extracted from the data which were interpreted more purposefully during analysis.

Participants

The six participants for this study were recruited through Manchester Metropolitan University's Psychology Research Participation Pool and also through the researcher's pre-existing contacts. On the Participation Pool, the study had an introduction page (appendix 1) which highlighted the requirements necessary to participate in the study: participants must be a student at university, between the ages of 18 and 21, come from a one-child family and their parents must still live together. These requirements minimise the possibility of other elements coming into play. For example, if the participant was an only child but only lived with one parent, this would bring about a whole new element within the interview that could possibly implicate the study findings. Similarly, having a particular age gap and occupation of the participant will help to reduce the possibility of age and occupation becoming another element that could affect the findings. Furthermore, as families can be extremely complex, there is the possibility that a participant may consider themselves an only child but still have step-siblings or adoptive siblings which could once again implicate the findings. Fortunately, none of the participants recruited for this study had any such sibling and were fully regarded as an only child, therefore appropriate for this study. This technique employed to recruit participants is called purposive sampling, where the characteristics of individuals are used as the basis of selection (Wilmot, 2005). The number of participants needed for qualitative research is often small, as a phenomenon only needs to appear once to be of value. As qualitative research aims for depth, the analysis of a large number of in-depth interviews would be difficult for the researcher to analyse effectively (Wilmot, 2005). Therefore, it was more valuable to effectively analyse a small number of interviews and extract more meaningful findings from them.

Data collection

Data for this study was collected using semi-structured interviews. Bernard (1988) stated that semi-structured interviewing is best used when there is only one chance to interview someone and when several interviews are being carried out into the field to collect data (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). The interview schedule (appendix 2) was derived from the research questions for this study. There were fifteen questions based around sociability, relationships and achievement, all in relation to psychological wellbeing. These questions were used as a guide, but on occasions the researcher followed topical trajectories where it was appropriate to encourage more detail surrounding a particular area. For example, the researcher asked "can you describe in a bit more detail?" about a certain topic of discussion, to gain a more detailed insight regarding that particular area. This provides the opportunity for identifying new ways of seeing and understanding the topic at hand (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). The interview questions were open-ended, meaning that the participant had to provide more than just a 'yes' or 'no' answer. "The first question

should be broad and open-ended, should reflect the nature of the research and be non-threatening" (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). Open-ended questions are advantageous to qualitative interviewing as they allow for self-expression, richness in detail and the possibility of unanticipated findings being discovered. The biggest advantage of semi-structured interviewing is that it encourages a two-way conversation between the interviewer and participant making the participant feel more comfortable and therefore increasing the likelihood that they will open up and talk about their personal experiences.

Procedure

Once ethical approval was granted (appendix 3), the procedure for this study began with the participant being asked to read the information sheet (appendix 4) which outlined the details of the study, how the participant would be involved, how ethical issues, such as confidentiality and anonymity were addressed and contacts for counselling services. The participant then read the consent form (appendix 5) which clearly outlined the aspects of their involvement in the study. They were then asked to indicate their agreement to this involvement by signing two consent forms, one for their records and one for the researcher's records, therefore giving informed consent to take part in the study. Before the interview took place, the researcher tried to establish a rapport with the participant by asking questions such as "how was your day?" and acting in a warm and friendly manner towards them. This was to try and make the participant feel more comfortable, therefore increasing the likelihood of them providing more in-depth detail about their personal thoughts, feelings and experiences during the interview. By establishing rapport, the style of the interview was more conversational and avoided the participant feeling interrogated. Kvale (1996) suggested that a good contact is established by attentive listening, with the interviewer showing interest, understanding and respect for what the interviewee has to say. The interview took place and was recorded onto the researcher's password-protected iPhone, meaning that only they had access to the data. Once the interview had finished, the participant was given a debrief sheet (appendix 6) which summarised the purpose of the study, that no deception occurred, counselling services available and how to withdraw from the study. They were also asked to provide a pseudonym in order to maintain their anonymity. Each interview was transcribed onto the researcher's password-protected computer, so only they had access to the transcripts, and the recordings were deleted from the iPhone.

Data analysis

The interview transcripts (appendix 7) were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method of qualitative analysis defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data". Braun and Clarke (2006) identified six phases of thematic analysis, which were followed throughout analysis of the data. The first phase of analysis was 'familiarising yourself with the data' which involved reading and re-reading the data whilst noting down initial ideas. The second phase was 'generating initial codes' which included coding interesting features in the data in a systematic fashion and collating data relevant to each code. The third phase was 'searching for themes' which involved collating the codes into potential themes and gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. The fourth phase was 'reviewing themes' which

included checking that the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and generating a thematic 'map' of analysis. The fifth phase was 'defining and naming themes' which involved refining the specifics of each theme by generating clear definitions and names for each theme. The sixth and final stage of analysis was 'producing the report'. This involved the selection and final analysis of compelling extract examples, relating the analysis back to the research question and literature, and producing a scholarly report of the analysis. A huge advantage of thematic analysis is that "it offers an accessible and theoretically-flexible approach to analysing qualitative data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a flexible and useful research tool which means that there is potential for a rich, detailed and complex account of the data to be provided (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Therefore, by thematically analysing the data, meaningful interpretations were able to be made.

Analysis and Discussion

This study aimed to gain an insight into the psychological wellbeing of only children by exploring their unique experiences as an only child. Through extensive thematic analysis, four over-arching themes were produced: no sibling closeness, positive parent-child relationship, high parental expectations and preference for a small group of people. The themes positive parent-child relationship and high parental expectations both contain sub-themes that are further explored in relation to the main theme.

Theme 1: No sibling closeness

This theme highlights the lack of a close sibling relationship for an only child. Almost all the participants mentioned that they often wished they had a sibling who they could talk to about issues they did not feel comfortable talking to their parents about.

> "I think that if I had a brother or sister that was a similar age to me…I would've had someone to talk to about personal issues when I was growing up" (Sophie, lines 84-85)

> "You wish you had someone there you could talk to" (Polly, lines 8-9)

Half of the participants directly linked this lack of communication with a sibling to their psychological wellbeing. One participant in particular mentioned her struggles with mental health issues and that she found it hard to talk to her parents about the way she was feeling.

> "I found it difficult to talk to my parents about it because I didn't want to worry them…I think it would've been a lot different if I had a sibling to talk to" (Charlotte, lines 96-99)

This participant specifically pointed out that she felt as if things would have been different if she had a sibling to talk to about her mental health issues. This is an interesting finding as it appears she is blaming the fact that she could not discuss her mental health issues with her parents and that her mental health suffered further as a result of it. Milevsky (2005) found that sibling support was associated with lower

loneliness and depression and with higher self-esteem and life satisfaction. Sibling support also compensated for low parental and peer support, which this participant may have felt she was lacking. Another participant mentioned that she had some struggles with depression and felt she was not able to talk to her parents about it so turned to her friends for support instead.

> "I definitely had days where I felt depressed…simply because I wasn't able to talk to either of my parents about what was going on" (Aisha, lines 122-123)

> "I talked to some of my friends but they didn't fully get where I was coming from" (Aisha, lines 128-129)

This participant also appears to blame the fact that she could not talk to her parents about her struggles, resulting in her feeling more depressed. Her friends also did not appear to be of much help when she tried to talk to them about her issues. Milevsky (2005) found that support from siblings compensated for low support from friends on measures of depression. From Milevsky's study, it seems that sibling support is highly beneficial to psychological wellbeing, however it does not account for people with siblings whose psychological wellbeing does suffer. It also extremely difficult for an only child to conceptualise how different their life would be if they had a sibling as a person cannot experience both life with and without a sibling, so therefore it is hard to say whether the presence of a sibling increases psychological wellbeing.

Theme 2: Positive parent-child relationship

Each participant emphasised the positivity of their relationship with either one or both parents and attributed this positivity to the fact that they were an only child.

Subtheme A: Closeness to parents

All of the participants stated that they were close to their parents, whether it was one or both parents.

> "When I compare it to my friends or other relatives, they can't talk to their parents the way I can" (Aisha, lines 16-17)

> "I think that being an only child has given me a close unique bond with my parents" (Charlotte, lines 108-109)

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) could explain the close relationship between only children and their parents. Due to the amount of time and the sole amount of attention the child receives from their parents throughout their life, particularly as a child, may develop a stronger bond between the parent and child, which therefore results in a closer relationship that is prolonged into adulthood. Falbo and Polit (1986) argue that the relationship between an only children and their parents is characterised by heightened anxiety and attention. Schachter (1959) went on to say that this anxiety motivates parents to react promptly to their child's behaviour which in turn establishes a closer connection between the parent and child in times of stress. The specific type of relationship the parent and only child share results in a

closer bond between them and seems to have a positive impact on the child's psychological wellbeing.

Subtheme B: Support from parents

The majority of the participants mentioned that their parents were highly supportive. This support was mainly related to academic achievement.

"My parents actually really encourage me to go for it" (Aisha, lines 99-100)

"They've always supported me academically…they want me to be ambitious and to succeed but they don't place unnecessary pressure on me" (Charlotte, lines 23-24)

Parental support has been shown to be highly beneficial in terms of psychological wellbeing. Shaw et al. (2004) found that a lack of parental support during childhood was associated with increased levels of depressive symptoms and chronic health conditions in adulthood. Shaw et al. (2004) went on to suggest that the association between early parental support and adult health could be largely due to the long-term impact of parent-child relationships on important psychosocial resources. Specifically, it seems that early parental support shapes a person's sense of personal control, self-esteem and family relationships, which in turn influences adult depressive symptoms and physical health. Therefore, it can be assumed that parental support is beneficial, particularly in terms of psychological wellbeing. This finding also provides evidence contrary to the common belief people hold that only children often feel more pressure from their parents to achieve than children with siblings. From the interviews, it appears that the participant's parents are highly supportive of them and provide them with encouragement rather than with a sense of pressure.

However, in one particular instance, one participant emphasised the fact that she felt that her father places pressure on her to achieve certain things. She termed it an "unconscious pressure" rather than a conscious pressure. She put this down to the fact that he did not go to college or university himself and the pressure he placed on her to do well academically stemmed from his own unfulfilled ambitions. The theory underlying this is that parents see their child as part of themselves so are especially inclined to transfer their own unfulfilled ambitions onto their child (Brummelman et al., 2013). Although there is very little research surrounding this topic, it still provides a plausible explanation as to why this particular participant felt pressure to achieve despite her parents being supportive as well.

Theme 3: High parental expectations

There is a common belief that parents with only one child have extremely high expectations of their child. For example, Waddell and Ball (1980) found that parents tended to underestimate the time certain things take, such as sleeping continuously through the night. It was also suggested by Clausen (1996) that these heightened parental expectations were maintained beyond this early period. Although only two of the participants explicitly discussed that they felt they had to live up to a high expectation, aspects of other participant's responses appeared to reveal similar

feelings, however on an unconscious level. This was evident by the way in which they discussed not wanting to upset their parents and wanting to make them proud.

Subtheme A: Avoiding upsetting parents

On several occasions, the participants discussed that they often tried to avoid upsetting their parents and that if they did, they felt extremely bad about it.

"I feel quite guilty that I've upset them" (Sophie, line 35)

"I know I'm their only child and I don't like making them feel like I've disappointed them or let them down in any way" (Charlotte, lines 31-32)

Although the participants were never specifically assessed in regards to their locus of control, it was evident from their responses that they possessed an internal locus of control, meaning that they believe they can influence events and outcomes. Evidence for this comes from the way in which the participants openly discussed how they felt about their parents responses to their actions, whether good or bad. It was clear that the participants understood that their own actions influenced their parents' response, largely due to the fact that there were no other children in the house. This is supported by Falbo's (1984) work in which she stated that an only child's internal locus of control develops as a result of parents reacting more promptly and frequently to their child's behaviour. Therefore, the child is more likely to develop the belief that their behaviour causes their parents reaction and develop a strong conception of the relationship between their behaviour and the reactions of their parents. Consequently, only children may try to avoid upsetting their parents as they know their behaviour will not go unnoticed.

Subtheme B: Wanting to make parents proud

Although wanting to make your parents proud is a trait the majority of children possess, it may be a heightened trait in only children due to the fact that they are the only child there to make their parents proud. Every participant interviewed discussed that they try to make their parents proud.

"I do want to achieve something to make them proud" (Sophie, line 25)

"When I'm doing something I'm thinking 'would my mum and dad be proud of this?'" (Polly, lines 63-64)

Interestingly, this participant went on to link this awareness of her actions in making her parents proud to the high expectations she felt were held. She openly discussed that she was born through IVF that her parents had tried six times for a baby.

"As I'm an IVF child, I do feel a bit more like I need to live up to an expectation" (Polly, lines 60-61)

Perhaps due to the fact that she is an only child and that she was born through IVF, the high expectations are increased on the parents' behalf as a result of how long they tried to have a baby for, and these high expectations have resulted in this

participant wanting to make her parents proud. Wang (1996) proposed that negative effects can arise from participation in IVF and the parent-child relationship. He stated that the high expectations placed on the child as a result of the extreme desire for a baby may increase the likelihood of conflict between the parent and child when overprotection and/or overindulgence are developed, particularly on the mother's behalf. Support for this also comes from Adler's (1927) theory of birth order, in which he suggested that only children are pampered, especially by their mother. This participant discussed that she often has "disagreements" and "fights over stupid things" with her mother which provides support for Wang's theory of conflict between the parent and child due to the high expectations they place on them.

The other participant who stated that she felt that her parents held high expectations of her referred to the reason as to why she was an only child as "genetic", however did not provide any further detail. It is possible that when biological reasons ('genetics' and IVF) as to why someone is an only child are involved, that the parent develops a higher level of expectations for their child. However, this does not account for only children who still feel that their parents have high expectations for their child despite biological reasons as to why they are an only child.

Theme 4: Preference for small groups of people

This theme relates to the ways in which the participants discussed how they felt towards large and small groups of people. Almost all of the participants said they had a small group of close friends. Half of the participants went on to say that they have difficulty socialising when around a big group of people.

> "I prefer social situations that are quieter and where there aren't loads of people around…I find myself being more social when I'm with a small group of people that I know well" (Charlotte, lines 49-53)

> "I used to be within a really large friendship group…but that was just a bit too overwhelming for me" (Jasmin, lines 55-57)

This preference to be around a small group of people appears to stem from being an only child. As the participants have not been used to being around other people whilst growing up, this may have impacted their preference for the number of people they surround themselves with at an older age. Falbo and Polit (1986) suggested that only children are less social compared to children with siblings possibly due to the lower need for affiliation they desire as a result of the large amount of affection received from their parents. Therefore, only children are less motivated to affiliate with others (Connors, 1963) and could explain why the participants from this study prefer to associate with a small amount of people.

Limitations

Although this study has provided an insight into the psychological wellbeing of only children, there are some limitations to the research. It was a small-scale study in which only six participants were interviewed. Further to this, all six participants were female and of a similar age so it is difficult to say whether psychological wellbeing is affected the same way in males and in other ages. Moreover, the ways in which people define psychological wellbeing may differ and because wellbeing may a

sensitive topic to some, may make them less willing to discuss it. Finally, one interview differed quite significantly to the others as no difficulties with psychological wellbeing were ever mentioned and did not appear to be present in this participant. Therefore, although being an only child does seem to have an impact on psychological wellbeing, it is difficult to say that solely being an only child affects wellbeing as there are only children who face no difficulties in psychological wellbeing and there are people with siblings who do face difficulties in psychological wellbeing. Concerning future research, it would be useful to repeat the study on a larger scale, by interviewing individuals with and without siblings and across several age groups to see whether similar findings occurred.

Summary

This study has provided an insight into the previously under-researched area of psychological wellbeing in only children. As there is an increasing trend towards one-child families and an increasing awareness surrounding psychological wellbeing, then inevitably the study of both combined is beneficial to the psychological literature. Implications of this research could include the application of further wellbeing awareness to educational or work settings which could help to inform policy and practice. Extra support or counselling services could be made available in schools, colleges, universities and in the workplace for individuals experiencing difficulties with their psychological wellbeing in relation to being an only child or perhaps home life in general.

Overall, the findings within each over-arching theme contribute to an understanding of psychological wellbeing in only children, previously under-researched. From the extensive thematic analysis, both sociability and achievement seem to be affected by being an only child, however had a lower than anticipated impact on psychological wellbeing. It appears that the relationship between the parent and the only child is of most significance to the child's psychological wellbeing. The relationship between the parent and child plays a vital role in the only child's life, and perhaps the aspects related to being an only child are what impact psychological wellbeing in the other parts of their life.

Reflexive Analysis

As the researcher, my own experience as an only child and difficulties with my own psychological wellbeing motivated me to delve deeper into this area due to the lack of research acknowledging psychological wellbeing in only children. I was also motivated by previous volunteer work at a primary school. There were two only children that I worked with, and it was noticeable that they faced some difficulties in terms of socialising with others and how this affected their wellbeing within school. One boy in particular was somewhat disliked by his peers and he would often come to me because he was upset about it. It was in this moment that I felt I could help other only children who face difficulties with their psychological wellbeing.

I was aware that my own personal experiences could be embodied in the research and potentially influence my interpretation of the participants' responses. However, I felt my subject positioning put me at an advantage as it gave me the opportunity to

delve deeper into the participants' experiences as an only child and further provided me with a deeper understanding. Furthermore, as five of the participants were recruited through my own pre-existing contacts, I already had a well-established rapport with them and the interview felt more like a conversation, which eased the flow. Although this was advantageous, I did not let this dual relationship inhibit my professional objectivity during the interviews. For the one participant that was recruited through the Participation Pool, I made it clear that I was also an only child so that she felt she could relate to me as opposed to perhaps feeling judged, so would be more open and honest with her responses.

Although the study was based around psychological wellbeing, perhaps sometimes I was reluctant to ask further questions when the topic of wellbeing arose, as I did not want to force the participant into talking about something they may not have felt comfortable discussing. Despite expecting sociability, relationships and achievement to affect an only child's psychological wellbeing, I did not expect to find that the parent-child relationship was of most significance to psychological wellbeing. I am pleased with the findings of this research and it gave me the chance to appreciate others' experiences about a topic that is close to my heart.

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